

THE AUTHENTIC JESUS

Catholic Belief versus Modern Fiction

THE AUTHENTIC JESUS

Due to the concern about many current media portrayals of Jesus Christ and the origins of Christianity, this resource, "The Authentic Jesus," was developed by the Committee on Communications, chaired by the Most Reverend Gerald F. Kicanas, in consultation with the USCCB Secretariat for Doctrine. The text was reviewed and approved by the Committee and is authorized for publication by the undersigned.

— **Monsignor David Malloy**
General Secretary
USCCB

More than ever, people are talking about Jesus Christ. But portrayals of him and of the origins of Christianity in popular novels, TV documentaries, and cover stories in major news magazines often raise more questions than they answer. Sometimes they directly challenge what the Church teaches and even the motivation behind these teachings. In order to bring the authentic Jesus back into focus, here are responses to important questions people are asking. Readers are encouraged to use the select bibliography to inform themselves more fully about Christ and Christianity.



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St. Catherine's Monastery (Egypt); Mt. Sinai (Egypt)

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1. What were the origins of the New Testament?



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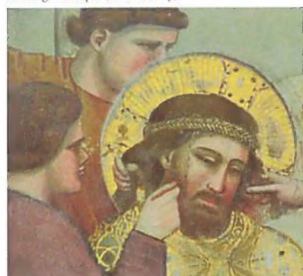
As Jews, the first Christians revered "the Law and the Prophets" (the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament) as God's inspired word. The Christian Gospel was first transmitted orally. Then, gradually, the events of Jesus' life and his saving words and deeds were written down. Some of these writings, such as the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and the letters of St. Paul, received the same reverence as the Hebrew Scriptures and became part of Christian worship.

Nearly all New Testament writings were composed between AD 50 and 100, when the memory of Christ was recent and fresh.

Over time, the bishops of the early Church, following the tradition of the whole community, identified 27 books as "canonical," that is, as belonging in the list of books considered to be inspired by the Holy Spirit and God's own word. **By AD 200, this New Testament "canon" was fixed in what was nearly its final form.** A letter of St. Athanasius written in AD 367 is the first known publication of this canon as we have it to this day.

The development of the New Testament canon was a Spirit-guided process, as shown by the fact that **not every ancient document was accepted as inspired.** For example, the "Protoevangelium of James" is the source of the names of Mary's parents, Joachim and Anne, and of the feast of the Presentation of Our Lady in the Temple. Yet it was not accepted as God's inspired word.

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2. Were some “gospels” rejected? If so, why?

Texts that were later called “**apocryphal gospels**” were not considered divinely inspired, such as the “Protoevangelium of James.” Another is the “Infancy Gospel of Thomas.” This book contains stories of wonders supposedly worked by Jesus as a young boy. However, many of these stories are so fantastic and even unbecoming to Jesus—in one, a child dies after the boy Jesus rebukes him for accidentally bumping into him—that this “gospel” was rejected as an unfaithful account of Jesus’ early life.

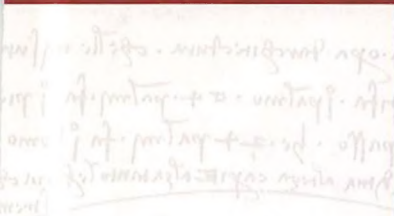
These writings, most of them coming down to the present day in fragments, have been known and studied from early Christian times. Between 1945 and 1947, a library of seemingly Christian texts was uncovered in Egypt and came to the attention of scholars. Almost all of these texts were unknown until this discovery. Some of them are now known as the “**Gnostic gospels.**” (These writings should not be confused with the “Dead Sea Scrolls,” texts belonging to the Jewish sect of the Essenes, which were discovered around the same time.)



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St. Catherine's Monastery; Mt. Sinai (Egypt)



St. Catherine's Monastery; Mt. Sinai (Egypt)

While these “gospels” may have similarities to Christian teaching, they also reflect the beliefs of **Gnosticism**, a religious movement that derives its name from “gnosis,” the Greek word for “knowledge.” Central to Gnosticism was belief in a saving knowledge that was not available to everyone but was only for an intellectual and spiritual elite. Gnosticism was originally thought to be a Christian heresy. Scholars now consider it a religious movement of its own, having a number of sources in the restless religious environment of the ancient world. Some of its branches absorbed elements of Christian belief that were treated very freely. As a result, early Church leaders opposed these “Christian” Gnostics.

Generally, the “Gnostic gospels” contain collections of sayings. They are very unlike the New Testament gospels in that they have little or no narrative about Jesus’ life or about his Passion, death, and Resurrection. While some of the sayings may be similar to those found in the New Testament and ancient in origin, most scholars agree that **these “gospels” were, on the whole, written significantly later than the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and may even depend on one or more of them.** Some of these writings may have been intended to challenge the authority of the New Testament writings.

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San Vitale (Ravenna, Italy)

Despite the similarities, **the way to view these texts is neither as “alternatives” nor as supplements to the Christian gospels.** They are writings in which Christian persons and beliefs are filtered through the lens of a religious philosophy that, in many important ways, differs from the Christianity of the New Testament.

3. Is belief in the divinity of Christ found in the New Testament?

Yes. Jesus revealed, through his words and actions, that he is truly the divine Son of God. He forgave sins, referred to God as “my Father,” and spoke of himself as “the Son.” He taught with an authority that only God could possess. He worked miracles.

Among the passages that highlight Jesus’ divinity is the **Prologue to St. John’s Gospel**: “In the beginning was the Word, / and the Word was with God, / and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh” (Jn 1:1, 14). Also in St. John’s gospel, after Thomas encounters the Risen Lord, he addresses him as “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28).

St. Paul’s Letter to the Philippians, written about 30 years after the Resurrection, contains a hymn to Jesus that is older than the letter itself. This hymn speaks of Christ Jesus “who, though he was in the form of God, / did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. / Rather, he emptied himself, / taking the form of a slave, / coming in human likeness” (Phil 2:6-7). As a hymn of praise to the Risen Christ, it shows **the worship given to Christ shortly after his death and Resurrection**: “That at the name of Jesus / every knee should bend, / of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, / and every tongue confess that / Jesus Christ is Lord, / to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:10-11).

St. Catherine’s Monastery (Egypt)



The Great Commission at the end of St. Matthew’s gospel reveals the Son as one of the Trinity of Persons in the one God: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19).

4. What did the Council of Nicaea do?



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The understanding of the mysteries of the faith has often deepened and developed through discussion and debate among theologians. When necessary, Church authority has decided whether the conclusions of these theologians are faithful to the Gospel.

The Council of Nicaea did not, as some have claimed, introduce for the first time the notion that Jesus Christ is God.

Some theologians at that time, in particular a priest named Arius, had been denying the belief of the Christian faithful from apostolic times that the Son, who “became flesh,” is truly God in the same sense that the Father is God.

This first “ecumenical council” (a council in which all the bishops of the Church are invited to participate) was summoned by the Emperor Constantine in AD 325 to resolve this dispute. They met in Nicaea (located in present-day Turkey), an accessible site for most bishops. The Council rejected the teachings of those who subordinated the Son to the Father and claimed that he was created by the Father. **Affirming the ancient belief of the Church, the bishops at the Council stated that the Son is “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in Being with the Father.”**



Stanza della Segnatura (Vatican, Rome, Italy)



Raphael (Rome, Italy)

5. Did Jesus remain unmarried?

The constant and unbroken Tradition of the Church holds that Jesus did not marry. The New Testament does not answer this question directly, but it also **does not offer any support for speculation about Jesus' being married or having a child.**

In the gospels, Jesus' family is referred to several times, but no spouse is mentioned. The gospels tell us that women accompanied Jesus on his ministry and were present at Calvary and at his tomb on the morning of his Resurrection. **But none of them is ever described as a spouse.**

In Acts 1:13-14, St. Luke describes the eleven remaining apostles gathered in prayer after the Ascension, "together with some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers." If Jesus had had a wife, surely she would have been present, and her presence would have been noted.

Some have argued that voluntary celibacy was unknown among the Jewish men of Jesus' time. While it may have been unusual, it was not unheard of. It is not likely that John the Baptist could have been married, and **near contemporary evidence indicates that at least some of the members of the Jewish community of the Essenes were celibate.**

Another indirect proof of Jesus' celibate state may be his own words about those who remain unmarried. After he rejects divorce as accepted in the Law of Moses, his disciples say that "it is better not to marry" (Mt 19:10). Jesus then speaks about those



"Disputa" by Raphael, Vatican's Stanza della Segnatura



Byzantine Mosaic of Jesus Christ, Holy Savior,
Chora Church, Istanbul

incapable of marriage “because they were born so” or “made so by others” and also those who “have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Whoever can accept this ought to accept it” (Mt 19:12).

St. Paul—who writes to the Corinthians, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1)—also writes, “Now to the unmarried and to widows I say: it is a good thing for them to remain as they are, as I do, but if they cannot exercise self-control they should marry, for it is better to marry than to be on fire” (1 Cor 7:8-9).

The theological concept of a celibate clergy is based on the Church’s belief in the example of the celibacy of Christ himself.

This call to celibacy does not diminish the importance of marriage. **Matrimony, like Holy Orders, is a sacrament, one of the seven signs through which Christ’s abiding presence is active in his Church.** In marriage, the spiritual and physical relationships between husband and wife become a holy symbol of Christ’s love for the Church (Eph 5:25-33).



St. Catherine's Monastery (Egypt)



Byzantine Mosaic of Women, Holy Savior
Chora Church, Istanbul

6. Who was Mary Magdalene, and was she given a special role in the Church?

Jesus' relationship with Mary Magdalene has become an issue when discussing whether Jesus was unmarried. Some of the Gnostic writings have been used to support a claim that Mary was Christ's spouse. In addition, some have claimed that Jesus intended that she head his Church. The evidence for these claims supposedly lies in a few passages in the Gnostic writings that show a closeness between Jesus and Mary and describe some hostility toward her on the part of St. Peter and St. Andrew.

But these passages do not, in fact, actually state either that Mary and Jesus were married or that he intended that she head his Church.

In the New Testament, Mary Magdalene is a prominent disciple of Christ. She is one of the women described as accompanying Jesus on his earthly mission after he cast seven demons out of her (Mk 16:9, Lk 8:1-3). For many centuries she was thought to be the unnamed woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and dried them with her hair (Lk 7:36-50). Although this association is no longer made, it was never an attempt to diminish Mary's memory, since repentance is the first step for any disciple of Jesus, who began his ministry proclaiming, "The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mk 1:15).

All four gospels mention Mary Magdalene as being at Calvary when Jesus was crucified and as being present at his tomb to be among the first to hear of his Resurrection. In St. John's gospel, she is the first recorded person to encounter the Risen Lord.



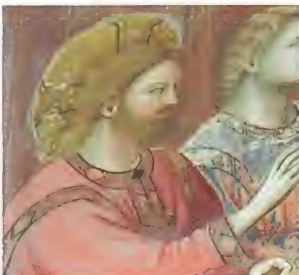
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Baptistry (Florence, Italy)

However, the claims about her made on the basis of the Gnostic texts cannot be taken seriously.

First, the Gnostic writings are historically more distant from the time of the apostles and written significantly later than the four New Testament gospels. Second, the prominence of Mary as a disciple and her closeness to Jesus are confirmed by the gospels, not evaded by them. At the same time, at no point do they offer any support for the gratuitous assertion that Jesus and Mary were married. Jesus is also shown to have a spiritual closeness to several followers: Peter alone; Peter, James, and John together; the “beloved disciple” in St. John’s gospel; and Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary. Lastly, the New Testament does not conceal tensions among the apostles, especially, at one point, between Peter and Paul. It is not likely that it would conceal evidence of other conflicts, such as the alleged one between Mary and Peter, if it existed.



Scrovegni Chapel (Padua, Italy)



Scrovegni Chapel (Padua, Italy)

7. What place have women had in the life of the Church?

As noted, the gospels tell of a group of **women companions who accompanied Jesus** and the apostles. They portray the women as remaining more steadfast during the Passion than the apostles themselves. In all four gospels, women are the first to receive the announcement of the Resurrection. Clearly the memory of these women was revered by the early Church community.

St. Paul's letters and the Acts of the Apostles record the **support given by women to the spread of the Gospel**. The women whose names appear in the Roman Canon testify to **the reverence given to female as well as male martyrs**.

As new ways emerged for Christians to answer the call to discipleship, women as well as men founded great religious communities —

St. Scholastica along with St. Benedict in the sixth century, St. Clare with St. Francis of Assisi in the thirteenth century, and St. Jane Frances de Chantal with St. Francis de Sales in the seventeenth century.



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Saint Helena by Andrea Bolgi,
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Women renowned for their piety exercised powerful influence in their eras: St. Catherine of Alexandria in the third to fourth centuries, St. Catherine of Siena in the fourteenth century, and St. Teresa of Avila in the sixteenth century.

Three American saints are women who profoundly influenced the Church in this country: St. Frances Xavier Cabrini, who served the needs of immigrants and the underprivileged; St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, who is considered the founder of the Catholic school system; and St. Katharine Drexel, who left a life of luxury to work with African and Native Americans.

Above all, the Church has always had a special devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus, the handmaid of the Lord, and the perfect disciple.



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All of these examples testify to the truth that in discipleship of Christ the lives of both women and men enrich the Church by their holiness.



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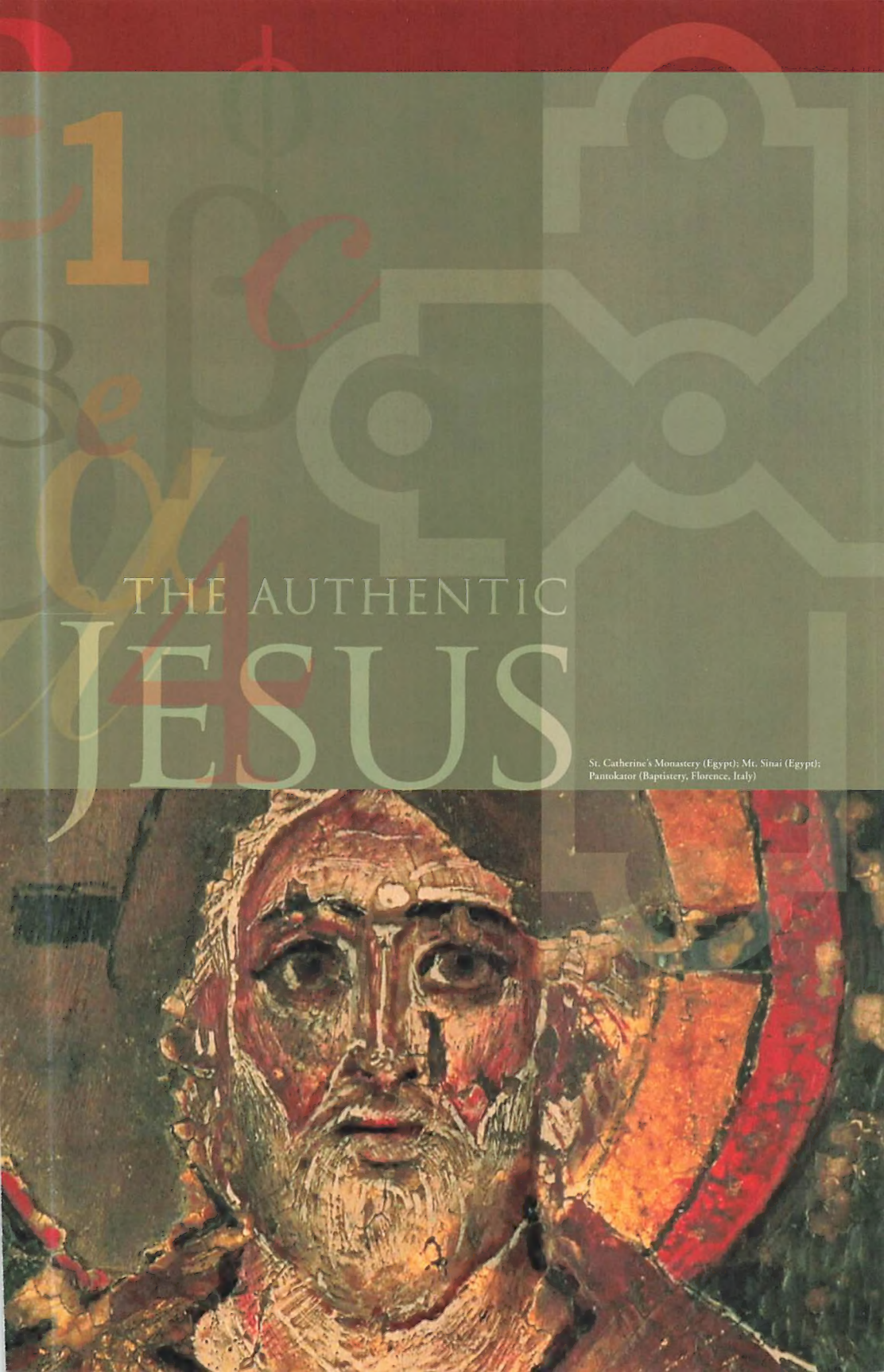
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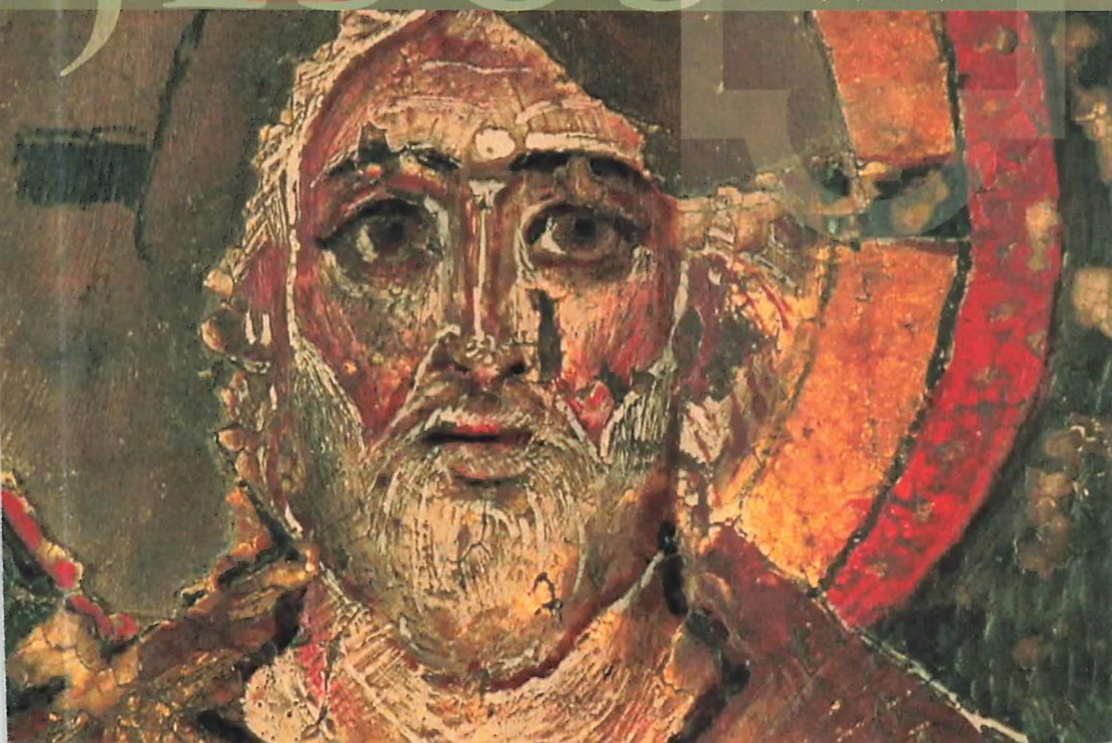


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THE AUTHENTIC JESUS

St. Catherine's Monastery (Egypt); Mt. Sinai (Egypt);
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